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Huck Finn and the Tragedy of Being Banned

Mark Twain once said, “I am perfectly astonished – a-s-t-o-n-i-s-h-e-d – ladies and gentlemen – astonished at the way history repeats itself.” This opening line of Twain’s speech at Papyrus Club in Boston on February 24, 1881 is proof of his fascination with the patterns of humanity. As the already famous author of *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*, Twain’s commentary on social hypocrisy and moral social maturation was well known. After writing this novel and confessing his interest in humanity, it is no surprise that Twain chose to once again delve into the world of fiction and produce what would become an instant classic that continues to be a vital part of American literature today. Twain’s statement regarding the nature of history repeating itself is truly ironic when compared to the reception of one of his most famous novels, *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*.

Written in the late 1800s but set before the Civil War, this novel successfully portrays a strong image of a typical southern society during the antebellum period. For this reason and several others, *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* is a novel that is both revered and loved by many. However, for every great praise there is also great criticism. Even though this novel is a true depiction of American history and a great asset to American literature, *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* is a novel that has received an equally bad reputation. Since its publication in 1884, Mark Twain’s masterpiece has been a source of great controversy and discussion as to whether or not such a book should be allowed in the public schools of the United States as

required reading for students. As proclaimed by Twain himself, “history repeats itself,” and the continuous controversy regarding this novel for over a hundred years is no exception.

Although some critics would love to see the novel go out of publication, the main focus of the push for censorship is within the education system. Andrew Levy, award-winning biographer, writes that *Huck Finn* “remains one of the most controversial books in American history, and in many schools has been removed from reading lists or shifted into elective courses” (xv). The fight for this book to be removed from the national curriculum has been a repetitive struggle that seems to have no ending. It is astounding that some of the same issues that were presented in favor of its removal in the 1800s are identical to issues being presented today.

The first and most prevailing issue that brings about great controversy and discussion is the obvious racism evident throughout the entire novel. Staying true to the time period, Twain writes of slaves, the slave trade, and the various roles of freed African Americans. Most commonly referred to as *niggers*, African Americans are portrayed as lesser beings existing with the sole purpose of aiding Whites. The harsh language, ill treatment, and demeaning activities directed towards these individuals create a cruel image of the White population and disparage the Black population. During the time of its publication, *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, a highly satirical novel, showcased the societal views of racism in a bright light. Drawing attention to the neglectful mindset of most southerners, the entire plot builds from Twain’s skillful incorporation of the major theme of racism. Twain’s novel was thought to be a “wrongful” depiction of slavery and racism. Being published after the addition of the thirteenth amendment, which abolished slavery, the earlier setting of *Huck Finn* works to not only show the crippling nature of slavery but also provide commentary on the lack of progression of the treatment of Blacks, especially in

the south. Alexandra Lindgren-Gibson confirms this in an article posted on the website for The Newberry, a Chicago research library, by stating “antagonism between North and South, Southern bitterness at defeat, and racism on both sides meant that early gains in political representation and equality for African Americans were quickly suppressed.” She continues on by revealing “The horrors of slavery disappeared from the nation’s history books, replaced by images of contented slaves and affectionate masters.” Twain’s novel directly contradicts this movement through the use of demeaning racist language, although appropriate for the time, inhuman treatment of Blacks, and references to barbarous southern slave plantations. In *Huck Finn’s America* Levy confirms this by stating “Twain placed that epithet in Huck’s mouth for a reason, as a small dagger drawn toward the consciousness of whites” (183). Because of this, many members of the White population felt they were depicted unfairly, in comparison to how they were attempting to be perceived, and feared the reaction of the Black population.

Likewise, the racist elements that encompass *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* continue to be viewed as a major issue with the novel even in the twenty-first century. However, the issues that are most often brought to light regarding racism have more to do with the racist influence some claim the book possesses. With the continued use of the word *nigger* and the overall demoting and dehumanizing manner afforded to the Black population, critics insist that allowing Mark Twain’s classic to remain in the literary cannon only serves to educate the youth on how to be racist and enables them to confidently seek opportunities for discrimination. Such direct alienation of a specific group of individuals because of the harsh language and racial slurs found within the pages of *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* is something that Sharon E. Rush describes in her academic article from the University of Michigan Law School. Rush insinuates that teaching *Huck Finn* in a public school setting can lead to harm that can best be defined as

emotional segregation. In addition, Rush compares this situation to the law case of *Brown v. Board of Education*. She states that the Supreme Court's 1954 ruling is applicable to the current issue with the court's statement that it "generates a feeling of inferiority as to [Black children's] status in the community that may affect their hearts and minds in a way unlikely ever to be undone" (qtd. in Rush 2). The author of this article argues that Mark Twain's novel should be removed from classrooms because it will leave lasting detrimental effects on Black students who read it. This novel empowers White students with the knowledge and opportunity to cause significant emotional distress, and "people of color should not have to depend on White society's kindness to protect their right to racial equality" (Rush 2). Those in favor of banning the novel argue the social standings presented in *Huck Finn* evoke feelings of white privilege and guilt, as well as emotions of anger, hurt, confusion, disappointment, and alienation in Black students. Overall, *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* is a novel most commonly challenged today for the emotional backlash that comes with it. Where a school is intended to be a safe zone for learning, this novel generates feelings that create a hostile environment where learning cannot and will not take precedence.

In addition to the obvious elements of racism, critics accuse *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* of being a novel that encourages and promotes child rebellion. Because the novel focuses heavily on the major theme of moral education, it is no surprise that critics grasp onto the fact that most school age children required to read this novel are still developing their moral education. It is true that children are easily influenced and will do whatever it takes to be perceived as "cool." Mark Twain presents Huck as an impressive bad boy whose characteristics are greatly appealing to children of equal age. Throughout the novel, Twain provides instances of Huck's moral rebellion in a way that appears to be exciting and adventurous to high school

students. At the very beginning of the novel, Huck proclaims, “Pretty soon I wanted to smoke, and asked the widow to let me. But she wouldn’t. She said it was a mean practice and wasn’t clean, and I must try not to do it any more. That is just the way with some people. They get down on a thing when they don’t know nothing about it” (Twain 132). Even though Twain acknowledges that smoking is bad, he presents it in a way that is all too familiar with children – the nagging adult chastises the child for something that seems insignificant and then turns around and participates in a similar action. Huck sees the widow’s snuff habit as no different than his smoking habit. This particular exchange is just one example that critics cite as evidence of Twain’s bad influence. Because of this very issue, *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* has been banned on multiple occasions. Just a month after publication, *Huck Finn* was banned from the Concord Public Library in Massachusetts because it was viewed “the veriest trash, suitable only for slums” (qtd. in “*Huck Finn* Teacher’s Guide”). Because of this library’s drastic decision to remove Twain’s novel from its shelves, the St. Louis Globe-Democrat, a trusted newspaper, included an article that declared the book to contain “a series of adventures of a very low grade of morality...” (qtd. in *Huck Finn* Teacher’s Guide”). Other libraries and institutions fell in line behind the Concord Public Library and began pulling the novel from the shelves simply “...because Huck and Tom were ‘bad’ role models” (“*Huck Finn* Teacher’s Guide”). Since its initial publication, *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* has been viewed by many as an off-color novel that should not be included in libraries, let alone the public schools, because of its negative moral influence. The belief that students who read this novel will inevitably desire to be like Huck and Tom is a true concern for many educators, parents, and members of society. Although Huck’s moral education does develop throughout the novel; he continues to be a boy who is truly wild at heart. In the final sentences, Huck relays that he plans to head out west to get away from

all civilization. He is a boy who desires the freedom to come and go as he pleases and the freedom to do anything and everything that he chooses. He refuses to submit to authority, and instead chooses to embark on a path that will enable him to truly escape the binding and restricting grasp of society. Critics argue that Huck's personality and actions will inevitably impact young readers in negative ways. For this reason, *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* has been banned time and time again and continually faces censorship challenges even in the twenty-first century.

It is remarkable that Mark Twain's classic novel, *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, has been banned from libraries and school since a month after its publication, and continues to consistently show up on current lists of banned books across the United States. As stated by Domencia Ruta, author and supporter of *PEN America*, "Nearly 130 years since then [its publication], this novel has been challenged defended, banned, expurgated, and bowdlerized numerous times by parents, educators, publishers and librarians. It is currently ranked number 14 on the top 100 Banned/Challenged books in America." The major issues most commonly listed as the cause of such action are the major elements of racism, which are often described as hurtful and overly racist, and the potential bad influence that the unruly characters convey to young readers. However, as expressed by Webb Harris Jr., a high school American Literature instructor, "*Huck Finn* was always...the most enjoyable authentic reading experience of the school year. For a teacher to abandon *Huck Finn* out of fear and timidity is, in my view, a shame." In addition to Harris, Jr., many educators, writers, parents, and readers believe in the power of Mark Twain's writing and in the importance of *Huck Finn* remaining an important literary piece that all Americans are introduced to while in middle or high school.

Although most critics accuse *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* of being a despicable novel for its use of derogatory language such as *nigger* and other various racial slurs, they fail to realize the significance that such a novel contributes to American literature. Although the time of slavery and discrimination is an unseemly era in American history, it is one that cannot and should not be forgotten. As Twain so eloquently pointed out in 1881, “history repeats itself.” Novels like *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* are a written testament of the history that the citizens of the United States and the world should be cautious and mindful of slipping back into. In addition, the racism that can be found within the pages was not perceived in the same way during the mid-eighteen hundreds as it is today. Although the language is harsh and treatment of slaves wrong, the use of *nigger* and the obvious Black inferiority were common practices during this time. Critics today wish to ban *Huck Finn* for its racial aspects but, even though Twain was satirizing the treatment of Blacks, he published a novel that reflected true southern society. An article on *Pen America* by Gil Kaufman states that Twain’s explicit language and writing style was his way of making “a point about slavery, but also because he wanted to be true to the language of the day.” Wanting to ban Twain’s novel for the sole purpose of its racism elements is a matter of injustice. Covering up history and pretending that such events never happened is more detrimental to the Black and White communities than the emotional segregation that Sharon Rush claims as a major reason for why the novel should be removed from public schools. Furthermore, schools are institutions intended to educate the coming generations for the future. Removing this classic novel from the literary cannon is something that Andrew Levy addresses by stating, “For those most invested, the book is a Rorschach test that divides those who think progress happens when we forget the ghosts of the past and those who think progress occurs when we remember them” (192). This debate, to ban or not to ban the novel because of race, is

one that Levy very easily sums up. However, history proves that by forgetting what one's ancestors went through one risks repeating mistakes that could have been learned from. As Harris, Jr. remarks, "The novel is a staple of American literature and, in its own right, of American history, too." Banning *Huck Finn* from the classroom is essentially disregarding many years of history that thousands of people worked endlessly to change.

In addition to the racial elements, *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* is also wrongly challenged for its bad moral influence. The very beginning of the novel contains a notice that reads: "Persons attempting to find a motive in this narrative will be prosecuted; persons attempting to find a moral in it will be banished..." (130). Mark Twain felt it necessary to humorously state that one cannot take morals from the book. He was very much aware that Huck and Tom both exhibit unruly behavior, however, most children do. This novel is very much a reflection on child play and behavior. As a novel told through the eyes of a young boy, it is only natural that Twain include evidence of immature action and logic as Huck struggles to find himself in a society he feels disconnected with. It is only in this sense that young students could possibly identify with Huck. Although children are easily influenced, the ridiculous components of this novel that many fret over are meant to be perceived as either humor or as child foolishness.

Huck Finn encompasses a grand amount of knowledge that is vastly beneficial to students. The value it possesses to American literature and American history cannot be overlooked. Banning this masterpiece is a wrongful act that negates much of the work towards social equality that Americans have fought to obtain. In addition, banning *Huck Finn* out of fear of invoking rebellious desires in the hearts of young readers is not only offensive to students but also an absurd notion. However, it is a battle that Americans have been fighting for years and, if

Twain's remarks on the nature of history are true, will continue to fight for years to come.

Because, like Huck states in the final line of his novel, "I been there before" (309).

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